

WASHINGTON TIMES
19 August 1985

Freedom fighter

By Bill Outlaw
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Camouflage fatigues and lace.

Bullriding, calf-roping and needlepoint.

M-16s, and foxholes; evening gowns and waltzing the night away.

"The best man for this job is a woman."

Karen McKay, executive director of the Committee for a Free Afghanistan, lives these contradictions.

A major in the U.S. Army reserves, she has worn her Army uniform to meetings with military personnel and white lace blouses while escorting Afghanistan freedom fighters. "Some people think I'm a GI Jane Fonda ... or Gloria Steinem in a camouflage," she says

of the reaction to a woman who advocates women in the military.

And now Mrs. McKay, whose weaponry qualifications include expert in the M-14, M-16 and .45, is aiming at former allies at the State Department on behalf of her friends in Afghanistan.

...

In her office, flowers stand in shell casings of rounds spent in Afghanistan. Paintings by Afghan artists and posters depicting freedom fighters and women and children in Afghanistan decorate the walls.

On small tables by her desk are Soviet military paraphernalia captured in Afghanistan — two armored vests, a gas mask, canteen and belt. A cartoon in the background proudly states "I love to court danger."

On the wall behind her are plaques and awards from her 18 years in the Army and her activities with the CFA. There's a certificate from the 82nd Airborne for completion of basic paratrooper training. She wanted to go to paratrooper school. She wanted to fire weapons.

She wanted to fight communism and help her country.

"I joined the Army to go fight in Vietnam and was told that women were too small and too weak to jump out of airplanes or fire guns," she says. "It's only now that they've come to the realization that we can do as well as the next guy."

After the Army said no, she couldn't go, Mrs. McKay waited some 15 years before she finished paratrooper school at the age of 42 despite suffering a broken pelvis that forced her to walk with a cane for nearly a year.

"I am one of the few people who can legitimately say they have actually busted their butt for the U.S. Army," she says.

She is qualified to fire 14 weapons. "I can handle a gun as well as a sewing

needle," she says. She can sling a mean chain saw. "I've also fired all of the Soviet stuff ... including the AKR [new Soviet automatic weapon]." She says she gave the first AKR to U.S. authorities in Pakistan.

Before joining the Army, she taught school and rode in California's rodeo circuit. Now, she spends much of her free time caring for and riding her horses on her suburban Virginia farm, where she lives with her husband and two children.

It's her second marriage. Her first husband was Greek. She lived in Greece for four years, and after that in Israel, where she worked on a doctorate before returning to the United States.

Her interest in the Army came from her father, who was killed fighting in World War II. "He died a hero," she says proudly.

If she is different from other women, she doesn't analyze it. "I don't spend time studying my navel ... wondering why it's there. I can be in a foxhole with an M-16 one minute, and in an evening gown that same night waltzing the night away."

She knows what she likes and what she believes in. No doubts. She believes in fighting the spread of global communism and helping an oppressed people, which is what the Committee for a Free Afghanistan is all about.

She was working for Reed Irvine at Accuracy in Media in January 1981 when two members of the Afghanistan resistance came by and talked about the media's lack of coverage of the Afghan resistance battling the Soviet Union since Moscow's invasion of their country in December 1979.

"None of us knew there was a war going on in Afghanistan," she recalls.

She took the "freedom fighters" around to meet congressional aides, members of Congress and other politicians in Washington. The response was encouraging, she recalls, and not long afterward she started the Committee for a Free Afghanistan at the urging of others.

It began as a one-woman job, and she had a makeshift office at the American Security Council. Then, she worked out of conservative political leader Paul Weyrich's quarters using a "borrowed desk, chair and telephone."

A board of directors included retired U.S. Army Maj. Gen. J. Milnor Roberts, executive director of the Reserve Officers Association; David Isby, author of "Weapons and Tactics of the Soviet Army" and a frequent contributor to *Soldier of Fortune* and *Jane's* military publications; Col. John Sheffey, head of the National Association of Uniformed Services and Mr. Irvine.

Other notables, including numerous top military officials and several members of Congress, are listed on the CFA's council of advisers.

"At first, it was hard to get people to listen to us," she says about the early days in 1981. "Afghanistan was a dead horse. When we first started talking about chemical weapons being used in Afghanistan, people laughed at us. When we started talking about Soviets using nerve gas, they laughed. And I understood John the Baptist's problem. You have a message, a mission. You're driven to say something and you haven't got anybody to listen."

As the response began to grow and the CFA began receiving financial support, she moved to an office on Pennsylvania Avenue in an area "where police didn't even want to go." Times were still difficult, she says, noting there were several sus-

Continued